

WAR AGAINST REDS DOMINATED NEWS

Anti-Communist Opposition to Regime Was Played Down by Washington

The following is by a correspondent formerly stationed in South Vietnam.

By HOMER BIGART

One day last June a 73-year-old Buddhist monk sat down in the middle of a Saigon street. Thousands watched in shock as his fellow monks poured gasoline over him and he calmly touched a match to his saffron-colored robes.

His suicide jolted millions, including top officials of the United States Government, into realizing that a strange new crisis confronted South Vietnam.

Ordinary crises involving intrigue, money and revolution have been commonplace under the authoritarian rule of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Since 1959 the regime, with massive support from the United States, has been involved in a nasty, frustrating war with Vietcong guerrillas. While there is no doubt that the Vietcong is Communist-led, the regime has made bitter enemies among non-Communists, also.

Bombing Played Down

The United States Government has tended to play down the non-Communist opposition to the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. Thus, when two Vietnamese Air Force officers bombed the presidential palace on Feb. 27, 1962, narrowly missing the ruling family, Washington echoed Saigon's contention that the incident was "isolated" and of passing consequence.

Those on the scene who felt that the bombing was a manifestation of deep-seated unrest were shushed and called defeatists.

Americans in Saigon assumed that the President and his family, if they lost power, would be overthrown by a military junta. They presumed that any new rulers would be those generals who had worked closely and amicably with the American military advisers.

Few Americans bothered to worry about the possibility of a religious revolution. They were aware, of course, that while the President and his family were Roman Catholics, 70 per cent of the population and an even higher percentage of the army were non-Catholic.

Buddhists Seemed Docile

Yet the Buddhists seemed docile, appeased by the fact that the President and his family were Buddhists.

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The first intimation of trouble came May 8, when Government troops fired on a Buddhist procession in Hue, killing nine marchers. The Buddhists were demonstrating against an attempt by the regime to ban the flying of their five-colored patchwork flags.

Hue (pronounced Way) is the seat of Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, a brother of the President, and of Ngo Dinh Can, another brother, who runs the northern provinces.

In a country where public protests are forbidden and the press is tightly muzzled, the Hue demonstration was a clear portent of impending crisis.

The Government refused to accept responsibility for the shooting down of peaceful demonstrators. Despite eyewitness reports and photographs, the Government insisted that a Communist guerrilla had thrown a grenade into the crowd.

Protest Quickly Swells

The Hue incident quickly grew into a full-scale popular protest. President Ngo Dinh Diem made a concession; the ban on Buddhist flags was rescinded.

The concession came too late. Buddhist leaders brought up other grievances.

Contending they had been treated as second-class citizens, the Buddhists demanded the right to buy and hold real estate as freely as did the churches of the Christian minority.

They demanded the conviction of the soldiers who had fired into the Hue procession and indemnity for the victims' families.

They demanded the right to meet freely without special police licenses.

This last demand sounded especially sinister to Ngo Dinh Nhu, a brother and chief political adviser of the President. He and his wife, Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu, who has expressed amused contempt at the world's concern over what she calls the "Buddhist barbecue," believe the regime cannot tolerate free expression while fighting the Communists.

Regime Warned by U. S.

By mid-June reports from South Vietnam were sufficiently alarming to oblige Washington to caution the Saigon Government.

The United States Embassy was instructed to tell President Ngo Dinh Diem "in the bluntest terms" that Buddhists disaffection could be disastrous.

The Kennedy Administration seemed to be losing faith in the effectiveness of quiet pressure. This pressure had never really penetrated the secretive and suspicious atmosphere of the regime.

The Ngo family, despite the presence of American advisers, continued to run the country.

The conduct of the war was clearly threatened by the regime's had sunk billions of dollars into the preservation of South Vietnam from Communist rule. The investment might go down the drain unless the regime came to terms quickly with the Buddhists.

In June the United States told President Ngo Binh Diem that it would publicly condemn the treatment of Buddhists unless he moved quickly to redress their grievances.

The regime reacted coldly. Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu charged that the United States Embassy had "threatened and blackmailed" her in an attempt to "shut me up."

Her husband, always suspicious of an American plot to overthrow the regime, summoned thirty of the nation's military leaders and upbraided them for having failed to take adequate precautions against a coup d'état.

Suicides Deepen Crisis

Meanwhile, the crisis deepened. Four more Buddhist monks and a nun killed themselves. The Government suffered military setbacks.

Yesterday the regime reacted by raiding Buddhist temples and jailing more than 100 monks. The President declared martial law.

Washington issued its threatened denunciation, calling the anti-Buddhist measures "repressive action" and contending that the action was "a direct violation by the Vietnamese Government of assurances that it was pursuing a policy of reconciliation with the Buddhists."

For nearly two years Washington has not acted, although the Saigon regime was becoming increasingly unpopular and increasingly incapable of arousing the war-weary population to greater efforts.

Washington discouraged criticism that the Saigon Government was repressive and that American aid had been wasted and mismanaged.

"Why don't reporters give President Diem the benefit of the doubt?" Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr. used to ask American correspondents.

Regime Appeased

The Ambassador's desire to maintain good relations with the Ngo Dinh Diem regime sometimes led to extreme appeasement. Embassy personnel were ordered to stop dancing, even in the privacy of their homes, when the Government cracked down on night life and decreed that modern dancing was "immoral."

Mr. Nolting has now ended his tour of duty in South Vietnam and is being replaced by Henry Cabot Lodge.

The involvement of the United States in the affairs of the Saigon regime did not begin with the Ambassador's surrenders.

Relations have seemed inexorable since 1954 when Ngo Dinh Diem rose to power in South Vietnam with American aid.

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opinion of most observers, in seeing in Ngo Dinh Diem the only clear prospect of a strong anti-Communist leadership.

Other Candidates Ruled Out

There were other candidates for power in Saigon when, after the defeat of the French in the Indochina War, Vietnam was partitioned, the Communists taking over North Vietnam and South Vietnam relying on American support. But the other candidates were either tarred as French collaborators or were palpably corrupt.

The chief C.I.A. agent, Col. Edward G. Lansdale, threw his support behind Ngo Dinh Diem, opposing the United States Ambassador, Gen. J. Lawton Collins, who recommended that the United States withhold support from the Saigon Government. Allen W. Dulles, then director general of the intelligence agency, persuaded his brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, that Colonel Lansdale was right.

President Ngo Dinh Diem may be credited with having saved South Vietnam for Communism. But Washington is wondering whether a strict policy of supporting him in maintaining an increasingly repressive regime may not alienate all the Buddhists of Southeast Asia.

The dilemma is that the United States considers South Vietnam militarily important. It controls the mouth of the Mekong River, the main artery of Southeast Asia. The country's remaining free nations of South and East Asia.